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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of how children "read" television pictures can provide understanding of how powerful a tool television is for teaching and learning. It affects the images viewers have of themselves and of the world. Turning off television is not only turning off experiences but also turning off opportunities for learning as well as preventing youngsters from looking through that window on the world and acquiring a visual image of what they see. Television provides visual images that enable people to see beyond the screen. (TJ)

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TELEVISION: Images and Meaning

Dr. Luberta Mays

"Television has profoundly affected the way in which members of the human race learn to become human beings" (Gerbner and Gross 1974).

I would like to expand on that statement to read as follows:

> Television has profoundly affected the way in which members of the human race develop images; consciously of others and perhaps less consciously, of self.

One of the outstanding environmental changes of the twentieth century has been the innovation of media. And, of all the media one could list, television affects us in more ways than we care to remember. It has had tremendous impact on us both as individuals and as group members, and indeed has provided us with a picture of the world interms of what people see, hear and most importantly <u>believe.</u>

This assault on our senses through media, has brought about a radical reconstruction of peoples auditory and visual experiences, and has indeed affected the way people perceive and learn about the world (Mays, Pagano 1978).

I'm sure we would all agree that to develop a good self concept or a positive self image is a worthy goal. Developing that goal is more a concern of <u>parents</u> and <u>teachers</u> than of all other persons with whom children may become involved. Much of that image building is influenced by others, based on our perception of how others see us.

For many, television has dared to enter our private domains, and stripped us (as parents and teachers) of previously used controls, which traditionally assisted us in helping others see the world. Television says blatantly, "here is the world! See it and perceive it."

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TELEVISION: IMAGES AND MEANING

Denotatively, we understand image to mean, a likeness or imitation of any person or thing; esp. a statue; a picture presented by the imagination, a reflection from a mirror. Looking at the word (images) connotatively, calls upon many personal experiences, and requires us to look into our past to see just what pictures we imagine. It has been said that we learned to understand the world through images long before we rationalized it through language.

What are the differences between a "picture" and an "image?" Technically, they mean the same thing. Alexander (1979) says, or makes the distinction in this manner. "A picture shows; an image lets us see." In viewing pictures not only 'do we see,' but we also procure an image, presented by that single picture or group of pictures. Further-more, these visual images are influenced by our own position in society. Many pictures of society, come into play while we seem to be 'just looking.' These then, are the real and powerful images. And the affect of these subtle images is what needs to be explored, even more than the aggression or violence that causes parents and teachers such concern.

The Child and T.V./Meaning and Image

The child's image symbols are a collection of actions, objects and events, which are related to one another in a unique and private way.

While television has truly enabled us to see the world, the real truth is that it has allowed many of us to see the world differently; in a broader context, sometimes eroding our private pictures of society or life. We must remember that some of the visual T.V. experiences, which are a 'story' for some children, are real

everyday life experiences for others. And not necessarily by choice. For those involved in real experiences as demonstrated in "Roots" and the "Holocaust," there was no fantasy or pretense. Similarly, for some, the violence and aggression on television is mild compared to the more subtle forms, they're forced to live with daily. T.V. for many is no figment of imagination it is real life. Thus, the violence in Kiddy cartoons, is somewhat of a joke and not taken seriously.

What affect this really has on us, depends very much on who you are. In other words, the meaning it has for anyone depends on the viewers image of himself/or the world. Again, looking at the fairly recent television phenomenon Roots I, and II, we see that visual pictures served to either substantiate our perception of slavery in these United States, or erode our personal images of life in those times.

For some black youngsters, it heightened their notions of the 'old south.' Others were basically informed...those who had no image at all, of the past.

In a recent newspaper article, one youngster indicated that Roots provided a highly visual image of what slavery was and how blacks struggled to be free. What will these visual images 'mean' to that youngster during the rest of her life? How will this affect her learning and knowing about those persons who were forced into slavery? Will the result of these visual pictures create a different person? Will this knowledge gained, cause a change in behavior?

Others, viewing Roots found the visual image almost real. It had a personal impact on them. Their concern was that others should not feel that the production was just a 'story' in the sense of, not being true. What they really were concerned about was whether other viewers would 'perceive' Roots as they 'felt' it. For them, it was like telling their own story, and as such these visual images had real meaning.

Certain aspects of Roots was, and for many still is a reality.

Television and Self Image

In a recent television study which I conducted for the New York States Department of Education, we were anxious to find out about attitudes that children had of themselves, and their reaction to seeing themselves on television. First we were surprised to see that children responded to like pictures of themselves totally in a manner which they felt would be approved by society. For example, Puerto Rican youngsters selected photographs of all Caucasian children when asked to choose pictures that looked like them. However, when shown actual pictures of themselves on television, they found it difficult not to identify openly with the Puerto Rican youngsters on screen. The visual image of their people, elicited immediate responses. I might add that because these were positive television segments, the identification was not at all painful. What really helped in their selection, was that they felt the projected image was accepted by others. Thus it was safe to identify. The program involved was 'Vegetable Soup,' which presents a positive image of a variety of ethnic groups.

Many Black youngsters have great difficulty in identifying with the 'Black Image' projected on television. There is no need to describe in detail, the numerous stereotypic situations and characters of Blacks in the Media, which contribute to this attitude. In the study previously mentioned, Blacks were elated at viewing themselves on television in a positive non stereotypic manner, rather than having their image perpetuated as shiftless, dancing, jiving blacks. One might seriously ask at this point, since T.V. allows negative visual images to be flashed on the screen in millions of homes, why not ban it? Banning T.V. is not the answer; the answer is, to develop positive and educational television experiences - both for the development of positive self image as well as

to acquire a more accurate perception of what we see.

Television frequently uses entertainment as a vehicle for social teaching about oneself, and others. And many children's shows are effective in terms of developing ideas about fair play, telling the truth, respect for others, respect for work and positive self image.

'Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids;' a truly black children's television show, grew out of an idea based on Bill Cosby's childhood in Philadelphia. Facing common problems familiar to all blacks growing up in urban cities, this show presents a picture so vivid that it is quite real to Black children. Yet, to other viewers it might be just an entertaining half hour, thus providing a totally different experience. To share another research experience with you, when showing a group of whites, a television segment on Native Americans, one child remarked "Oh! I didn't know there were any more Indians alive." Yes, television teaches many social values; some good and some bad. Dr. Charles Bolz of Southwest Educational Development Laboratory says. .. "my philosophy is that T.V. is neither good nor bad, but that it can be a window on the world." We must help children, parents and teachers to use it properly.

Print and Imagery

Looking, Laughing and Learning

It is said that imagery is a set of mental pictures. It is possible to extrapolate many meanings from mental pictures gleaned from television. Several studies indicate that imagery positively affects both meaning and memory of populations who otherwise perform poorly.

Rohwer and Maltz (1975) tested middle-class white and lower-class black fourth (4th) graders listening to stories.

The stories were accompanied by either the printed word on a pictorial version of the story.

Results indicate that both middle and lower class whites using the pictorial version produced higher responses to questions asked following the experiment. The responses were even greater with Black youngsters. Rohwer and Maltz (1975) also indicate that some Black youngsters, experienced difficulty on items which required inference, when presented with the printed version only. However, the study, indicated that Black youngsters who were presented pictures did much better on inference than their peers who were presented with only the printed version of the text.

Guttmann et al., 1977 posits that imagery strategy facilitated both rate learning, and retention of meaning by first graders. Imagery affected recall even if the testing was done several days after the passage was originally presented (Kulhavy and Swenson, 1975). Second graders who were shown pictures as they listened to a story, demonstrated higher levels of achievement than control subjects who were read to, even when the testing was done several days later. (Peng, 1977)

Just as television is the phenomenon in technology that we are discussing today, it is highly conceivable that in the near future electromyographic data may be utilized to find answers to important questions about children's visual information processing.

Perhaps then we can answer questions like - How do children "read" pictures? Do children label pictures as they see them? What affect does the labeling have on processing the pictorial information. and do they internalize what they see? If so, How? Why? and When does this take place?

Knowledge of how children read T.V. pictures can provide a real understanding of how powerful a tool television is for teaching and learning.

For many, turning off T.V., is not only turning off experiences, but also turning off tremendous opportunities for learning. In so doing, we will be preventing thousands of youngsters from looking through that window on the world, and acquiring a visual image of what they see.

"A picture shows, an image let's us see." Television provides visual images that enable us to see beyond the screen.

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